

Article by Rosemary O'Shea

GROWING UP ASIAN IN AUSTRALIA

Edited by Alice Pung

INTRODUCTION

All the writers in this anthology explore the idea of being both Asian and Australian. Many write of the struggle to reconcile their two cultures, while others describe feeling excluded from one or even both cultures. While some celebrate the richness of the different elements of their identity, many of the writers have found establishing a solid sense of Asian-Australian identity to be a painful process.

Most of the voices speak in the first person about childhood and adolescence, with a level of intimacy and immediacy. No single contributor speaks for a whole culture, as each experience is unique. The voices range from humorous and self-deprecating to heartfelt and angry. 'Asian' is interpreted widely. The contributors' cultures are diverse, and include Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Bangladeshi, Thai and Filipino-Turkish backgrounds. Some of the contributors are high achievers in media, politics and the arts, and the writers' ages range from as young as 17 to people in their 60s. Even though some contributions have been written in the third person, the writers clamour to tell us that all are true in essence.

Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging in Growing up Asian in Australia

During adolescence, people often begin to face the dilemma of who they are and where they belong. Many writers in this anthology are confronted by this problem at a much earlier age, when school experiences bring home the stark reality that they are different from those around them, in their language, their food and their appearance. The anthology shows how a sense of being different can profoundly affect a child, causing loneliness, confusion and very often a desire to deny their own culture. Sometimes, racism and cruelty intensify the misery.

Being an immigrant is hard, and being the child of immigrants brings its own problems. The writers portray many parents who have arrived almost penniless in Australia and have worked hard, determined to achieve prosperity, or at least economic survival. The older generation takes comfort from their extended family and cultural rituals, often struggling with English and seemingly more comfortable identifying as Chinese or Vietnamese than as Australian. Their children, however, strive to establish a more complex identity which combines Asian heritage and Australian experience. This often causes conflict, as many parents who want their children to succeed in Australia also want them to avoid becoming Australian in attitude and behaviour. The writers present the difficulty of coping with family expectations, and with parents who cannot comprehend their problems of identity and belonging. For some writers, assuming an Asian-Australian identity has brought estrangement from the family and made it more difficult to establish a sense of belonging.

The contributors tell stories of friendships that help them survive and define themselves; of struggles against the stereotype of the Asian student who is entirely focused on study; and of overcoming problems of communication in their relationships.

IDEAS & ARGUMENTS IN THE TEXT

Overview

Growing up Asian in Australia presents the experiences of more than fifty writers, but their stories often return to common themes that run through the anthology.

Family expectations of young Asian-Australians

Almost all the contributors describe parents whose work ethic is powerful and who expect the children to work in the family business. Academic success is seen as a guarantee of a prosperous future, and also as a way of bringing honour to the family. People who were raised to show obedience to their parents, and respect for their tradition, often expect their children to behave in the same way. When second-generation migrant children wish to learn the ways of the prevailing culture, this act of embracing Australian ways often means disappointing Asian parents.

Learning English and learning 'Australian'

Schools and playgrounds are often testing grounds for children, where difference can mean persecution. Some writers describe feeling envious of their Australian peers' ease at negotiating the language and the culture. Others write of feeling ashamed of parents who lack the ability to speak English.

The judgement of others affects our sense of self

Experiences of prejudice, ignorance and racism affect young people in different ways. Many Australians have a stereotyped view of Asian people, and battling this forms the basis for several stories. It is easier to join forces with others in the same situation, some stories suggest, than to fight the stereotype alone.

Forging an identity from two cultures

Does growing up Asian in Australia mean combining the best of both cultures to create a rich personal identity, or does it mean losing something important? How much heritage must be lost in the process of assimilating? Are family fracture and cultural alienation necessary by-products of becoming Australian? The writers present different views on the cost of self-determination.

Appearance influences the sense of self

Many of the writers tell of seeing a stranger's face in the mirror. Feeling Australian while looking Asian creates a destabilising sense of dissociation from the self. Some of these writers have been born to families of blended cultures, where one parent is Asian and one Anglo, and they must confront decisions about the extent to which their mixed heritage defines their identity.

Establishing an adult identity

The search for a place to belong can become more complicated for young Asian-Australians trying to form adult relationships. As their parents often expect them to marry within their traditional culture, finding an Anglo partner can lead to conflict. Those who come to realise that they are homosexual may find it even harder to gain acceptance within both the family culture and a largely heterosexual community.

Analysis of key ideas and arguments

Family expectations of young Asian-Australians

Our parents are our first teachers, and they teach us values, attitudes and beliefs that help define us. The writers in this collection describe families who work hard in factories, farms and shops, and expect their children to do the same. 'Perfect Chinese children,' as Vanessa Woods tells us, are unlike Australian children, who 'don't work as hard, are loud and uncouth and, worst of all, talk back to their parents' (p.105). Hard work is seen by traditional Chinese

families as the way to succeed in life, and successful children bring honour to the family.

Parental demands sometimes seem harsh to young people immersed in an easygoing Australian world. Although Annette Shun Wah in '**Spiderbait**' (pp.57–64) writes cheerfully of singing as she worked in the racket of 3000 chickens on her parents' poultry farm (p.63), Lily Chan tells of dreading four o'clock every day when she started work after school in the family restaurant (p.64). Adopting a diligent work ethic sometimes sees Asian children stereotyped as different by their Australian peers.

Preserving their traditions and language in order to preserve their identity, some parents are happiest in the company of their extended family and others from the old country, 'in their own cultural bubble' (p.158). Parents' efforts to distance their children from Australian culture can lead to crises in family relationships. Diana Nguyen's moving story about her mother's rejection ('**Five Ways to Disappoint Your Vietnamese Mother**', pp.287–91) and Pauline Nguyen's account of running away from her angry and controlling father ('**The Courage of Soldiers**', pp.291–6) show that the cost of deciding your own identity can sometimes be division from your family.

Parents who are at ease in Australia are more able to help their children settle into the new world. Cindy Pan's father encourages the little girl in her ambitions: 'You are genius!', he says (p.179), and he teaches her ballroom dancing as they work in a muddy paddock. Shalini Akhil's sensitive grandmother in '**Destiny**' (pp.176–9) makes the child proud of her Indian traditions. Many writers have internalised their parents' values. Jason Yat-Sen Li writes of his respect for his parents' Confucian values and his gratitude for their efforts 'to build foundations' (p.265) for him to become a worker for political change. However, many young Asian-Australians must find their own place between two cultures without family assistance.

The extended Asian family is also a powerful force on the child's developing sense of self. It may be censorious and critical, as Ken Chan describes in '**Quarrel**' (p.159), but it offers a powerful sense of belonging. As Diem Vo tells

us, despite dysfunction and chaos, 'loneliness was never a problem,' (pp.158–9) unlike in the split nuclear family of his Australian friend.

Discussion questions

- There is often tension between your desire to follow your own dreams and ambitions, and the hopes and expectations your parents may have for you. To what extent should you compromise your own wishes to show respect for family expectations?
- Although people may decide to reject family expectations, they are always influenced by the values, attitudes and beliefs they have learned from their parents. Is it true to say that we can decide for ourselves who we will become?

The language of belonging: learning English and learning 'Australian'

Many stories in the anthology explore the difficulties of navigating between two languages and cultures. Some of the writers are at ease in their two languages, comfortably bilingual, but for others communication barriers have been hard to overcome.

'If I couldn't express myself, then who was my self?' (p.48), Simon Tong wonders, relating the identity crisis he experienced as a fourteen year old immigrant, and the rage he felt when his Hong Kong English made no sense to his classmates. Being 'robbed of speech' (p.47), he felt a loss of dignity, a diminishing of his very self. He describes a desperate, urgent need to acquire the language, the first step into Australian culture. His story suggests that without the means of expressing yourself and being understood, you remain in the shadows of your adopted country, unable to belong.

Having parents with limited understanding of English brings its own problems. Some writers describe their resentment at the reversal of roles, when as children they had to interpret Australian culture for their parents, 'translating at parent-teacher interviews, explaining every bill' (p.157). Ivy Cheng feels anguish for her parents, who were 'always standing awkwardly to one side,

smiling, at school functions' (p.18). The dependence of parent on child can destabilise the natural order of the family and the child's understanding of their role within it.

Some contributors write of abandoning their first language, seeing it as too difficult or unnecessary for their lives as Australians. Amy Choi 'didn't see the point of speaking Chinese' (p.7), unaware that forgetting her first language would cost her the chance to communicate with her grandfather. Ivy Tseng resisted her father's lessons in Mandarin, and later regretted the lost chance to enrich herself with an 'inheritance of over 4000 years of history, language and values' (p.18). Both writers describe the laborious effort they have made to regain their family language, and the value that connecting with their elders has come to have for them as Asian-Australians.

Learning how to navigate Australian culture is just as important as learning the language when it comes to finding a sense of belonging. The writers describe a fierce desire to fit in and to smooth out the differences between themselves and their peers. 'I met Australia in the school playground' (p.76), Aditi Gouvernel tells us, and this is true for many of the writers. While some tell stories of learning to deal with schoolyard bullies and torment, others tell of warm friendships with Anglo children, like Tanveer Ahmed's affection for his mate Lynch: 'I admired his crew cut and was riveted by his rat's tail' (p.96). As children, they have mostly been concerned with becoming Australian, anglicising their names and trying to disguise their exotic lunches, rather than celebrating their Asian heritage. Pride in their background has often emerged through later reflection, a luxury that they could not afford as children struggling to survive in an alien culture. Perhaps it is not until people gain enough cultural capital to feel safely Australian that they can become confidently Asian-Australian.

Discussion questions

- Is it possible to participate in a community, and to belong to it in a meaningful way, if you do not speak or understand the language?

- In what ways do some groups, including cliques and friendship groups in schools, exclude people by using words and phrases in ways that others do not understand?
- How might being the family interpreter for parents who speak little English affect a child's relationship with their parents?

The judgement of others affects our sense of self

People in Australia often have to deal with racial discrimination and this has been true for many of the writers. A judgemental society makes it hard for someone from a minority culture to feel accepted. Mia Francis lists some of the name-calling her son endured in a small country town where 'a dark-skinned Asian child' (p.143) was a rarity. Taunts that call attention to differences in appearance, or insults to the child's culture are commonplace in these Asian-Australian writers' stories, with the schoolyard as a microcosm of the wider society.

Writers tell of their different approaches to combating racism. Jenny Kee's rebellious teenage self was confident: 'If anyone tried to mess with me, they'd get a rock in their face' (p.221). Simone Lazaroo's father armed himself with tokens of respectability, 'the new car and my BBC accent' (p.117), against the Perth police who were contemptuous of his dark skin. Jason Yat-Sen Li let his academic excellence speak for itself when an employer questioned his English skills (p.265), and was moved to become involved in public life as the best way to combat racism. Whether the response is silence or counter-aggression, the experience of being abused for being different focuses the individual's mind on those differences and can make it harder to achieve a sense of belonging to the community.

However, not all discrimination is intentional. There are examples of Asian-Australians suffering unwanted attention from well-meaning people who have fixed ideas about Asians. Jacqui Larkin's patronising kindergarten teacher (p.332) and Leanne Hall's nightmare, 'the cutesy, Hello Kitty-loving, Asian manga-girl' stereotype (p.228), are examples of events causing the respective

writers an uneasy sense that they are exotic and not really part of mainstream culture. In an ironic switch, Benjamin Law tells us of his own stereotyping, making sure that his accent marked him as Australian, not one of ‘the actual Asian tourists’ (p.148) at Dreamworld. Sometimes, deciding who we consider to be the ‘other’ helps us to define our own identity.

Uyen Loewald’s bitter, sarcastic poem ‘**Be Good, Little Migrants**’ (pp.225–6) expresses her rage at the discrimination Australia metes out to its minority groups. Spoken from the patronising viewpoint of assumed Australian superiority, the poem uses the repetition of ‘be good’ to enforce the idea that the newcomers are unimportant and should be quietly useful and obedient in their new country. ‘Little’ migrants are infantilised, their culture seen as colourful ‘low arts’ (p.226) and their contribution as menial. The expectation that migrants must be grateful, must conform and assimilate – forever doomed to a minor role in society – is mocked by the poem’s sarcastic tone. Loewald lets us see the restrictions that stereotyping places on people, and the painful struggle migrants have in gaining respect and being accepted in Australian society. Her final line, ‘Just waste a few generations’ (p.226), reveals the frustration and despair felt by migrants who know that their full potential cannot be realised in a hostile culture that designates them as inferior.

Discussion questions

- ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me.’ Is the old saying true, or do you believe that exclusion and discrimination are as damaging as physical violence to a person’s sense of self?
- In what ways can people unintentionally stereotype members of minority groups, such as the disabled or those from religious or ethnic minorities?

Forging an identity from two cultures

There are many ways of being Asian-Australian and it seems that every individual finds their own path. Moving into full participation in Australian life can

mean the loss of your first culture. Tony Ayres expresses this movingly in '**Silence**', where he contrasts his fate – to 'cross a threshold from one culture and class into another' (p.238) – with the life of a waitress, the overworked first daughter of a traditional Chinese family. His decision to eat in the restaurant is prompted by nostalgia for his childhood but he judges its shabbiness with the eye of an outsider. Still, with an insider's understanding of nuances of difference in status, he knows immediately that the restaurant boys are 'probably from Hong Kong, possibly illegal' (p.235). However, Ayres leaves the restaurant to return to his real life with his Anglo partner, aware that the gap between himself and the waitress is immense. Their cultures are separate, 'two frequencies out of alignment' (p.238), and with a tone of regret he concludes that 'there is no going back' (p.238). This story suggests that an independent identity sometimes comes at a profound cost, such as the loss of one's birth culture.

Some young Asian-Australians describe feeling 'culturally bipolar' (p.301). For example, Paul Nguyen reflects on the rich confusion of influences that make up his memories of childhood: both Vietnamese and Australian, both *The Simpsons* and the Vietnamese *Paris by Night*, and he confides to us that he has spent a great deal of time trying to define himself. As Nguyen writes of his uneasy relationship with his mother, we see that cultural expectations as well as unresolved issues and resentments between generations can hinder people in the search for a fulfilled sense of self.

For people with a mixed Anglo-Asian background, it can also be difficult to forge an individual identity out of their combined heritage. Leanne Hall acts out the stereotype of the cute Asian girl when she appears in a Japanese beer commercial, but is acutely aware that this is not the full sum of her identity ('**How to be Japanese**' pp.227–34). Feeling fully Australian, she believes that others are fooled by her Asian appearance into seeing her wrongly, and she describes herself as 'bitter or paranoid' (p.233) about her confused sense of self.

It has taken time for some contributors to come to a greater understanding of their own place and identity as Asian-Australians. Returning to the motherland

is an enlightening experience for many. Kylie Kwong, for example, feels delight at realising she is part of an 'enchanted, extraordinary and energetic family' (p.323) and she is able to embrace her Chinese heritage as an enriching aspect of her life. Others come slowly to an appreciation of the family language – which they had earlier dismissed as irrelevant – so that they can achieve a deeper communication with their cultural heritage. Hoa Pham claims that after a long battle, she can describe herself as Vietnamese-Australian but, even now, 'there is a struggle in that hyphen' (p.262).

The experiences of the writers are diverse. For some, finding their identity and the place they belong has meant moving away from the family or the culture while others achieve a more or less seamless blending of elements to create a newly-minted sense of self as both Asian and Australian. Many also live with the burden of uncertainty, unsure quite where they belong.

Discussion questions

- Must a person who chooses to be part of the mainstream culture always lose some part of their original cultural identity?
- Why is it easier for the children of migrants than for their parents to feel that they belong to the mainstream culture?

The face in the mirror: appearance influences the sense of self

One of the most haunting ideas that runs through the anthology is the idea that for some of the writers, their appearance does not match their sense of who they really are. This strange disconnection is expressed by those who feel most at home in Australia: often third- or fourth-generation Asian-Australians or the children of blended Anglo-Asian families.

'When we looked at our faces in the mirror ... foreigners would appear', Blossom Beeby writes, describing the dilemma of Asian adoptees raised in Anglo families and often without much knowledge of their birth culture or language (p.324). For Beeby, it was not until she sought the company of other young Asians and visited her native Korea to learn more about her beginnings

that she was able to accommodate 'the different bits' of herself 'comfortably' (p.329). Like many of the writers, she describes a continuing process of defining her identity, but is happy to go on questioning as 'it seems to make things clearer' (p.329).

Hoa Pham describes the Australian media's promotion of beauty as 'whitewashing' (p.261), and explains how it prompted her as a little girl to draw herself with blue eyes and blonde hair. Joy Hopwood, too, felt the pervasive influence of the stereotype when, as an aspiring actor, she was offered only exotic roles that matched her Asian appearance and belied her broad Australian accent. Hopwood has worked to overturn that stereotype, becoming the first regular Asian presenter on the children's television program *Play School*. Perhaps the representation on our television screens of the many different faces in Australian society will mean that Asian-Australian children in the future can draw what they see in the mirror without confusion.

Joo-Inn Chew's delightful story, '**Chinese Dancing, Bendigo Style**' explores at length the dilemma of looking Chinese but feeling Australian, and comes to the triumphant conclusion that she is actually unique. Just as her Chinese father in moving away from his origins has 'evolved into his own peculiar species' (p.248), she has worked through her feelings of displacement to a position of pride regarding being 'half-half' (p.250). Initially resenting her 'poo-brown eyes and flat yellow nose' (p.246) Chew, with her siblings, finds rescue in the Bendigo Chinese Association: a fixture in the town since gold rush days. With its cultural roots deep in the community, the Association provides an opportunity for the child to dance, sing and parade in processions applauded by the townspeople – a euphoric affirmation that to be Asian in Australia is also to be Australian. Ironically, although Chew concludes that she is happy to be unique, she is delighted to meet other Chinese-Australian children in the Association, 'the blue-eyed Tans and brown-haired Wongs' (p.249). It is easier to come to an acceptance of your own place in the world when there are others like you to validate your way of belonging and make a 'tribe' (p.249).

Discussion questions

- Do you agree that films and television present Anglo Australians as being the 'face' of Australia?
- How might the lack of Asian, African or Middle Eastern role models in the media affect the self esteem of young people from these groups?

Establishing an adult identity

Determining who we are and where we belong as adults is influenced by both our past and our present, by what we already know and what we yearn for. Finding peers and partners who affirm us is a vital part of this. It is, of course, not only Asian-Australians who feel uncertainty and confusion during the adolescent journey towards self-determination. However, the difficulties may sometimes be more acute for people who have felt like outsiders from early childhood.

Identifying as homosexual can complicate an adolescent's search for a secure sense of self. Benjamin Law ponders the puzzle of who he is in '**Toward Manhood**' (pp.195–203). He regards his body as 'this Asian hybrid man-child thing' (p.195) and contrasts himself unfavourably with bigger, stronger and more macho males. He does not face the problem of family rejection when he confesses being gay to his mother, but cannot easily reconcile his homosexuality with his own understanding of what it is to be a man. Law is wryly ironic about his adolescence as he tells us that being perceived as Asian masked his emerging homosexuality from his peers at school. 'People never suspected you could be a racial minority *and* gay', he observes (p.200). There is a strong feeling through Law's witty, confident writing that his double dilemma – how to be an Asian-Australian and a homosexual man – is solved by the ready acceptance (by his family and his Anglo partner) of the individual he has become.

As well as a supportive family, Lian Low identifies creativity, in the form of both writing and performance, as a factor that has helped her reconcile her 'multiple identities: Asian, woman, queer, migrant, Chinese-Malaysian-Australian' (p.219). Acceptance of her complex persona has been public, as Low's autobiographical writing for the stage has been rewarded and applauded. Like Benjamin Law, her journey toward self-understanding has been made easier by the support and affirmation of others.

Seeking a partner and looking for acceptance from someone who sees you as you really are is part of any adolescent's experience. Sometimes Asian-Australians have found that search more complicated. Hoa Pham finds that both Asian and Anglo boyfriends limit her by stereotyping (p.262), but is content with a photographer whose artist's eyes see her unique, mixed racial beauty. Leanne Hall tells us about her suspicions of a 'serial Asian fetishist' (p.233) and worries that the men who ask her out date only Asian women. Both women express anger and frustration at being judged by potential partners on their race rather than their individuality.

Many of the writers describe coming to terms with the complexity of their identity with the passage of time. Some use their own experiences as Asian-Australians to determine their future course in life, like Joy Hopwood's determination to expand the cultural stereotype by forging a career in television. Others gain confidence when they realise that the differences that concerned them in their youth are not always due to their Asian culture at all. As Joo-Inn Chew writes, 'a lot of "Chinese" things were just Dad things' (p.248).

Discussion question

- Growing up is easier when you have others to support and affirm the person you are becoming. How might stereotyping of minority groups make it hard for young people to express the complexity of their identity?

Sample scene analysis

Read the passage from '**Baked Beans and Burnt Toast**' (pp.329–37), from 'Even I feel like staring at me' (p.331) to 'I feel my jaw slowly starting to drop open' (p.336).

Summary

On Jacqui's first day at school, she feels conspicuous and uncomfortable when the teacher focuses on her Asian name and assumes she cannot speak English. Jacqui and her friend Jo-Ann are teased in the playground by Peter, who leaves the school suddenly and Jacqui wonders what became of him, finally meeting him years later in Hong Kong.

Questions for exploring ideas

- What assumptions does the teacher make about Jacqui's background? In what ways is she patronising and discriminatory? Are her assumptions racist?
- 'I stand out like a plate of chicken feet at a sausage sizzle.' In what ways does Jacqui's Asian heritage make her feel an outsider at school? How does her friendship with Jo-Ann help her through this?
- Jacqui assumes that Peter probably became 'a walking stereotype with a beer gut.' Is she justified in thinking this? Is she also being patronising, discriminatory or racist?
- Does Peter's explanation help us to understand why some people adopt racist attitudes to those from other cultural backgrounds?

Focus on text features

As well as drawing on ideas from *Growing up Asian in Australia* in your writing about *Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging*, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structures and features of the text. For example, the following aspects of *Growing up Asian in Australia* may influence how you choose to use language in the text you create:

- The reflective, first-person narrative chosen by most writers in the anthology. This is an effective way to engage the reader and to convey a deeply personal view.
- An expository style of listing. For example, Diana Nguyen's '**Five Ways to Disappoint Your Vietnamese Mother**' builds in intensity towards a sad, rueful ending.
- Terse and vivid language presenting the hostility that migrants face, such as the language Ken Chau and Uyen Loewald use in their poetry.
- Extended metaphors, like Thao Nguyen's image of the water buffalo to represent the strength and endurance of the Vietnamese father.

Points of view on the context

These discussion/writing questions, activities and prompts are designed to help you reflect on and refer to ideas raised by the Context in *Growing up Asian in Australia*, by developing your own point of view on these ideas.

Discussion/writing questions

- How is the family affected when a young person has to mediate between non-English speaking parents and the Australian mainstream?
- Alice Pung names two of the sections in her book *Battlers* and *Pioneers*. How do the Asian families in this anthology reveal the same qualities of spirit as Australia's early European settlers?
- 'I regret not paying closer attention during those Chinese lessons', writes Ivy Tseng (p.20). What do you think are the costs for migrants of assimilating into Australian culture?
- Do you think it is more difficult for first-generation migrants to find a place in Australian society, or for their children?

Activities

- In pairs, create a letter from an Asian-Australian daughter to her mother, explaining that her acceptance of Australian culture is not betrayal of the family, but the only way she can survive in her world.
- Write a short piece reflecting on a time when you felt torn between two different groups that you felt connected to.
- Debate the following topic: 'It is important to feel a strong connection to the community and place in which you live.'
- In small groups, create a dialogue set in a school playground to show how marginalising a child for perceived differences can undermine confidence and self-esteem.

Sample prompts

1. A critical society makes it hard for children from minority cultures or groups to find a way to belong.
2. Family expectations are formative and influential in determining who and what we become.
3. It can be hard to establish your identity when you feel different from those around you.
4. Our appearance can be an important factor in developing a sense of our own identity.
5. Sometimes choosing to belong to one culture or group means losing your place in another.

THE TEXT

Pung, Alice (ed.) 2008, *Growing up Asian in Australia*, Black Inc., Melbourne.

OTHER RESOURCES

Abdel-Fattah, Randa 2005, *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney.

Akhil, Shalini 2005, *The Bollywood Beauty*, Penguin, Melbourne.

Cho, Tom 2009, *Look Who's Morphing*, Giramondo, Sydney.